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## Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara*

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While maintaining the motivation generated during the prayers, we can now engage in our meditation practice. [meditation]

As usual, let us generate a positive motivation for receiving the teachings along these lines:

For the sake of all mother sentient beings I need to achieve enlightenment. So for that purpose I will engage in listening to the Mahayana teachings and put them into practice well.

As mentioned last week, the *tong-len* practice we meditate on is the very core of Mahayana practice, so the more we familiarise ourselves with it the more it reveals to us the whole purpose of listening to the teachings and practising them.

As mentioned previously, in the seven-step cause and effect sequence of developing bodhicitta, the immediate state of mind preceding bodhicitta is called superior intention. This is the mind where one personally takes complete responsibility to free all beings from all suffering, and lead them to the ultimate state of happiness. Having developed this strong personal commitment, one looks deeper into whether one has the ability to do so right now, and realises one does not, but the Buddha does. So one sees that achieving enlightenment is paramount to fulfilling this key purpose. This becomes the immediate cause for developing bodhicitta, which is an essential point to recognise. Once one has developed bodhicitta, the actions that follow are the practises of a bodhisattva.

In relation to the technique of equalising and exchanging oneself with others, while superior intention is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly included in the practice. In understanding how the *tong-len* practice works, where one voluntarily takes upon the suffering of all sentient beings and gives one's happiness to them, one sees that it involves taking personal responsibility. Thus the superior intention is definitely included in the technique. Prior to developing superior intention one needs to first develop great love and great compassion, where one has the spontaneous strong wish that all beings be endowed in happiness, and be free from all suffering.

When one develops superior intention it is no longer a mere wish, rather it is an actual commitment to take on that as a personal responsibility. With that understanding, engaging in the *tong-len* practice provides a supreme method for one to free beings from suffering by taking their suffering upon oneself, and place them in happiness by giving one's own happiness to them. Hence the *tong-len* practice is putting the superior intention into practice.

Engaging in regular *tong-len* meditation and incorporating it into our daily lives is a highly meaningful core practice, and it is of paramount importance in the development of love and compassion in our hearts.

As much as we can, we should familiarise our mind with love and compassion as these are the most essential qualities one can develop. The reason we need to take it more seriously and use our time now to regularly acquaint ourselves with love and compassion, is because day by day we are getting closer and closer to the end of our life. If we ensure that we familiarise ourselves with love and compassion then, at the same time as we get closer to the end of this life, we'll also be getting closer to having a good rebirth.

It is essential to act now, while one has the opportunity, because if one doesn't seize this opportunity it is like losing a precious jewel. If we had a precious jewel and we were to lose it before we got a chance to use it, we'd consider that a great loss. The cultivation of love and compassion is like a precious jewel: we have it as a potential within us right now and it is up to us to actually use it by further developing it.

In the refuge teachings, we can understand why the actual refuge within the three jewels is the Dharma jewel. That is because the Dharma jewel is the actual means to protect one from an unfortunate rebirth in the next life, as well as all other fears and sufferings. The very essence of Dharma is none other than the cultivation of love and compassion. Therefore, the more we develop love and compassion, the closer we get to a higher rebirth in our next life, and thus closer to attaining enlightenment.

If one wonders whether one is getting closer to enlightenment or not, observe whether love and compassion is developing in one's heart. When one finds that love and compassion is developing more and more strongly in one's heart, then there's no doubt that one is getting closer and closer to enlightenment. Love and compassion are the basis for developing bodhicitta, and as we develop bodhicitta we are getting closer to enlightenment.

I'm sharing this advice as an essential practice. Just knowing about Dharma topics is not sufficient; one needs to engage in practise. A mere intellectual understanding of the Dharma doesn't seem to move one's mind. But by putting it into practise, meditating and familiarising ourselves with the feeling of love and compassion in our hearts again and again, one will actually begin to have the real taste of Dharma. As it moves our mind we will begin to see a real transformation taking place within ourselves.

If one gains more knowledge of the Dharma, if one doesn't put it into practise, then there is a danger that one generates more pride. We need to protect ourselves from this pitfall. The more we integrate the Dharma within our minds, the more it will overcome the delusions rather than strengthening them. When we put the Dharma into practise then it becomes the means to actually overcome pride, jealousy, anger, attachment and so forth. Every piece of advice the Buddha gave in all his teachings serves as antidotes for overcoming the delusions. When

we integrate the Dharma within our minds, and put it into practise, we will find that transformation does take place. While I don't claim to have any realisations myself, it is with a genuine belief in the Dharma that I present these points for consideration. I spend a lot of time thinking about these points myself and strongly feel that putting the Dharma into practise is a definite way to achieve positive effects. So with this intention in mind I share these points with you again and again.

#### 2.2.1.2.1.1. The object of belief

2.2.1.2.1.1.3. *Analysing what one has done and what one has not (cont.)*

As mentioned in verse 38, which we covered in our last session, we need to ensure that our purpose is not merely to have caused suffering while in the mother's womb.

Again, the verses read:

37. *I did not make offerings to the tathagatas  
Nor did I offer the happiness of great  
celebrations.  
I did not do anything for the teachings  
And I did not meet the needs of the destitute.*
38. *I did not offer fearlessness to those in danger.  
Nor did I give happiness to the wretched.  
Hence, I have only given pain and suffering  
While in the mother's womb.*

The verses indicate that if one has not put any effort into the practice of Dharma, then it is as if the only thing we've really done in our lives is bring suffering to our mother. They contain profound advice if we pay attention.

#### 2.2.1.2.1.2. The result of belief

This section of the outline is divided into two:

2.2.1.2.1.2.1. It is unsuitable to give up the belief in the Dharma

2.2.1.2.1.2.2. The reason for this

Here we can reflect on how meticulously Gyalsab Rinpoche presents outlines to explain the meaning of the verses.

He presents that it is unsuitable to give up belief in the Dharma. Naturally, when it explains that one shouldn't give up the belief in the Dharma, one may wonder what the reason may be. So, the next verses provide the reason for not giving up belief in the Dharma.

If belief is important then what are its causes? That is presented next and the sequence itself is very profound.

2.2.1.2.1.2.1. *It is unsuitable to give up the belief in the Dharma*

The verse reads:

39. *Through being separated from belief in Dharma,  
Previously and in the present,  
I have received this destitution.  
Who would give up the wish for the Dharma?*

The commentary explains:

Through having been separated from belief in the holy Dharma, both by way of ascertaining and faith<sup>1</sup>,

in the present and in the past, I am experiencing the destitution of being held by the degenerations of cyclic existence. Who that is proficient would give up the belief for the Dharma? Those that wish to be liberated from degeneration should generate belief for the Dharma.

The commentary first presents the shortcomings of not believing in the Dharma, *Through having been separated from belief in the holy Dharma, both by way of ascertaining and faith*, i.e. by lacking ascertainment and faith in the Dharma, *in the present and in the past*, as the result of that what one is *experiencing* now is the *destitution* - the state of *being held by the degenerations* or the sufferings of *cyclic existence*. This essentially points out that the various types of suffering and turmoil one is now experiencing physically and mentally are due to a lack of belief in the Dharma. When one lacks belief in the Dharma, the aspiration to practise Dharma will not arise, therefore aspiration is very much related to belief or faith in the Dharma. So when one has faith then the aspiration to incorporate it and practise it will arise. What is being presented here is that one's present destitute situation in cyclic existence is the result of a lack of faith in the Dharma in the past.

The commentary continues, *who that is proficient would give up the belief for the Dharma?* Those who are proficient refers to those with a profound understanding of the law of cause and effect i.e. karma. The rhetorical question implies that when one has a deep understanding of karma, and an analytical wisdom knowing the cause and effect sequence of karma, then such a skilled, proficient person would not give up a belief in Dharma, as they would value it.

The commentary continues with, *those that wish to be liberated from degeneration*, and here *degeneration* refers to a state of perpetual suffering in cyclic existence. The conclusion is that those wishing to be liberated from that state *should generate belief for the Dharma*.

Gyalsab Rinpoche himself presents a concluding remark on the meaning of the verse: *those that wish to be liberated from degeneration, should definitely generate belief in the Dharma*, because no-one wants to experience these sufferings of cyclic existence. Understanding what causes the sufferings of cyclic existence helps to free one from them. That is the Dharma. Understanding this, one would definitely generate belief in the Dharma.

2.2.1.2.1.2.2. *The reason for this*

The outline next provides the reason for not giving up the belief in the Dharma.

The first two lines of the verse read:

40ab. *The Able One taught that the root  
Of every class of virtue is belief.*

The commentary then explains:

The Able One taught that the root of every class of virtue is the belief that has trust in the virtuous objects the way they have been ascertained. It is taught like this in the *Sutra of the Moon Lamp*.

As presented here, *the Able One*, being Shakyamuni, has *taught that the root of every class of virtue is the belief that has trust in the virtuous objects*. Every class of virtue here refers to the virtues which serve as a cause to obtain high

<sup>1</sup> Belief of those of sharp-faculty and belief of those of dull-faculty. Although in Buddhism there is faith based on reason, here faith refers to faith without analysis.

status and definite goodness. High status refers to a rebirth in the higher realms in the next life, as well as the causes for definite goodness, which is liberation and enlightenment.

*Every class of virtue* subsumes all of the virtues, and the root of acquiring all virtues is the *belief that has trust in the virtuous objects*. Here, *the root*, means that without belief one cannot possibly ascertain virtuous objects, and so one would not aspire to engage in the virtues that are the cause for all the positive results. This also implies that the way virtuous objects have been ascertained brings about virtuous results, while negative causes bring about negative results. Ascertaining this understanding helps one engage in the virtues and actually accomplish those goals.

It explicitly says that the root (or basis) of every class of virtue is belief, which means that it is not the case that for some virtues you need to have belief as a basis while for others you don't. This means that all virtues, from the most basic up to the ultimate, are based on belief. The commentary mentions *the Sutra of the Moon Lamp* in which the Buddha states this.

#### 2.2.1.2.1.3. The cause for belief

This is subdivided into two:

2.2.1.2.1.3.1. Showing the cause for belief

2.2.1.2.1.3.2. Explaining the cause of belief

*2.2.1.2.1.3.1. Showing the cause for belief*

What I explained earlier is presented in the next two lines of the verse.

The verse reads:

*40cd. Its root is continual meditation  
On the ripening results.*

The commentary explains the meaning of the verse as follows:

The root of belief in turn is to meditate on belief in the virtuous and non-virtuous karmas and their ripening results. If one has not ascertained karmic cause and effect well, then one has not found a realisation of the Dharma that will please the buddhas. Therefore one should strive in it.

The fact that some who say they have ascertained emptiness, but disregard karmic cause and effect, invalidates their understanding of emptiness.

Here the commentary specifically presents that *the root of belief in turn is to meditate* or to familiarise oneself with *belief in the virtuous and non-virtuous karmas and their ripening results*. The way to develop belief or faith is to meditate, and to familiarise oneself again and again with *the virtuous and non-virtuous karmas and their ripening results*. This means that the more one contemplates it, the more one develops a conviction in the cause and effect sequence of how non-virtuous actions (non-virtuous karma) definitely bring about unwanted results such as suffering, and that virtuous karmas definitely bring about happiness as their result.

The deeper one's conviction in this, the more inclined one would be to avoid non-virtuous actions (non-virtuous karma) as a way to prevent experiencing the effect of suffering, and the more inclined one will be to engage in virtues as a way to gain the results of happiness for

oneself. If one has a weak conviction about this fact, then one would not hesitate to create non-virtues and may not be keen on developing virtuous actions. Therefore the very root of belief is developing that conviction.

Gyaltsab Rinpoche further emphasises this point when stating that *if one has not ascertained karmic cause and effect well, then one has not found a realisation of the Dharma, one has not actualised the Dharma that will please the buddhas. Therefore one should strive in it*. Here, the commentary specifically gives the advice that for as long as one has not developed a strong conviction on the karmic cause and effect sequence, then, no matter what understanding one may have gained, one has actually not actualised the Dharma in a way that would please the buddhas.

The core advice of the Buddha's teachings, its very basis, is to avoid harming other sentient beings, and on top of that, to engage in ways to benefit and help other beings. On that basis one then goes for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. So the core of the Buddha's teachings is non-harmfulness or non-violence towards other beings.

Without a conviction in the cause and effect of karma, there is nothing to stop one from engaging in harmful actions that actually harm sentient beings. Then, if one harms sentient beings, there is no way one can please the buddhas because the sentient beings are the very object which the buddhas hold most dear. So when we harm sentient beings we will naturally be displeasing the buddhas by going against their advice. Therefore the more one abides by the law of karma and refrains from engaging in non-virtuous deeds that harm other beings, the more we engage in practices that please the buddhas. Hence, the commentary emphasises, *one should strive in it*.

To be considered a Buddhist practitioner, the basic practice is observing morality. In this sense morality refers to specific practices which refrain from harming other sentient beings. Then, based on practising morality, one engages in further practices that are presented in the teachings. As such, the morality of refraining from harming other beings is the very basis of Buddhism, so if one is practising that one can safely assume that one is a practising Buddhist. We need to understand that the essence of the Buddha's teaching is based on morality, and that all of the other practices ensue from that.

Gyaltsab Je further mentions, *the fact that some who say they have ascertained emptiness, but disregard karmic cause and effect, invalidates their understanding of emptiness*, which is a point we touched on earlier. The danger here is that without a correct understanding of emptiness one may easily misinterpret emptiness to mean that nothing exists, and therefore karmic cause and effect also doesn't exist. One could easily come to this wrong conclusion and then think one could do anything one wishes, as cause and effect doesn't apply to oneself. However, when one gains the correct understanding of emptiness it should in fact validate and strengthen one's understanding of the cause and effect of karma. This should be the case, as understanding emptiness involves understanding that things are empty of inherent existence i.e. that things are empty of existing independently, and thus of not relying on any causes and conditions. When that is ascertained,

one understands that everything arises in dependence on its causes and conditions i.e. dependent arising.

When things are presented as being empty, if one does not understand that this means being empty of inherent existence, one falls short of the real meaning of emptiness and faces the danger of negating actual existence, and thus holding a wrong view of karma by thinking that cause and effect does not apply. When one understands that emptiness means things are empty of independent existence, then that actually establishes that they exist interdependently. I've explained this point before with the passage from the *Heart Sutra* that says, *form is empty, emptiness is form*, which is exactly the point made here. When one understands how form is empty of inherent existence then that understanding validates what emptiness is. This phrase explains how all existence, forms, and all other phenomena, are actually manifestations of emptiness. Because form is empty of inherent existence it is possible to establish form conventionally; if form were to exist inherently then it would not be possible for form to function on a conventional level. To restate the point, because form is empty of inherent existence it is possible for form to function and exist as form. Thus, form and all other phenomena arise as manifestations of emptiness.

I've explained these points in detail in previous teachings. So whenever there's mention of emptiness you need to incorporate those explanations to reinforce the proper understanding. In this way you will be able to periodically bring the correct understating of emptiness to mind, and familiarising yourselves with it again and again. Every moment we think about the meaning of emptiness, and apply that understanding in our practice, it becomes a powerful means to gain an incredible amount of merit as it is a highly virtuous activity. At the same time it also becomes the most powerful means to purify extensive negative karmas, by removing subtle imprints of misconceptions. And at the same time it also implants very positive imprints in our mind.

So, when thinking simply about how form is empty, and incorporating that understanding right away, you will come to see that it doesn't mean that form does not exist, rather that it doesn't exist inherently and independently. While it does *not* exist inherently and independently, it does exist, but there is no other way for it to exist either than by depending on causes and conditions. When that understanding develops in our mind we are moving in the right direction towards gaining the unmistakable and correct understanding of emptiness.

#### 2.2.1.2.1.3.2. Explaining the cause of belief

This is subdivided into three:

2.2.1.2.1.3.2.1. Contemplating mixed karmic cause and effect

2.2.1.2.1.3.2.2. Contemplating singular white karmic cause and effect

2.2.1.2.1.3.2.3. Contemplating black karmic cause and effect

This heading presents the various types of karmas as the cause for belief. The first, *mixed karmic cause and effect*, implies there are certain karmas that we create which are not entirely virtuous or not entirely non-virtuous, but a

mixture of both. Then there is *singular white karmic cause and effect*, meaning that certain karmas are completely virtuous and thus their effect is also completely virtuous. Then contemplating the black karma is where the karma in its entirety is negative.

#### 2.2.1.2.1.3.2.1. Contemplating mixed karmic cause and effect

Contemplating and understanding this is a very practical way for one to get a good understanding of the basis of the Dharma. So it is very relevant to us.

The verse reads:

41. *Sufferings and mental unhappiness,  
The many different horrors,  
And being separated from one's wishes  
Arise from negative behaviour.*

The commentary reads as follows:

Because the physical sufferings of migrators, their mental feelings of unhappiness, the different horrors of human and non-human existences and separation from the objects of one's wishes such as friends, relatives, wealth and so forth all arise from the cause of negative behaviour, one should strive in abandoning negativity.

Gyaltsab Je's commentary explains the sufferings of certain migrators, even in the human realms. *The physical sufferings of migrators* as well as *their mental feelings of unhappiness*, plus *the different horrors of human and non-human existences*, refers to the harms we may experience from other human or non-human existences. Furthermore, there's suffering arising from *separation from the objects of one's wishes such as friends, relatives, wealth and so forth*. All of the experiences we have, even with good conditions as a human, *arise from negative behaviour* and negative actions. Understanding this one should resolve to *strive in abandoning negativity*.

To understand this on a personal level, recognise that whenever we experience a mishap, it is not others who have caused us this mishap. We are experiencing the results of our own negative karma. Practising the opposite of this creates the opposite effect, which is presented in the next two verses where the *singular karmic cause and effect* is explained.

The next two verses read:

42. *By creating the virtue intended in one's mind,  
Wherever one migrates to  
There one will, through these merits,  
Be honoured by the resulting qualities.*
43. *Although those creating negativity wish for  
happiness  
Wherever they migrate to,  
There they will, through this negativity,  
Be destroyed by the weapons of suffering.*

The commentary explains the meaning of these verses whose essence I have explained already:

Having created the virtue one intended to do in one's mind, motivated by the mind of abandoning, whichever birthplace one then migrates to, there one will, through these merits, be honoured by the resulting qualities of the ripening result.

The effects however do not follow merely the wish for happiness or suffering. Although the person acting non-virtuously wishes for happiness, by nature, wherever they migrate to, there they will,

through that negativity, be destroyed by the weapons of suffering. Therefore one should strive in abandoning negativity. The qualities of the result are the mode of the nature of the result.

It says that, *having created the virtue one intended to do in one's mind, motivated by the mind of abandoning as a result, whichever birthplace one then migrates to, there one will, through these merits, be honoured by the resulting qualities of the ripening result.* This explains that when one's mind is motivated with the intention of abandoning negativity, it creates virtue, which then becomes the ripened result experienced in whatever place to which one migrates. Wherever one may happen to be reborn, the merits will ripen in that place.

On the point that, *whichever birthplace one then migrates to, there one will, through these merits, be honoured by the resulting qualities of the ripening result,* the commentary specifically explains the infallibility of karma. In other words, if one has created virtues, then that virtuous result will definitely be experienced wherever one may take rebirth.

This also holds true for the non-virtuous karmas one has created. For example, while being reborn in an unfortunate realm such as an animal, which is a result of a previous negative karma, some good conditions can be experienced. We know some pets are very well fed and well groomed with a seemingly nice, free life and fully taken care of. These good conditions are the result of positive karma, created previously by that being. So even if one is reborn in an unfortunate rebirth, one still carries the positive imprints of previously-created good karma.

In contrast, a being might have a higher rebirth such as in the human realm, but the conditions are very poor. The means for basic survival are scarce, and many hardships, difficulties and sufferings are experienced. This is an example of how, while a previous good karma brings them into a good rebirth, what they then experience as bad conditions are the results of previously created negative karma. This again shows the infallibility of karma; even when one is born in a good migration, in a higher rebirth, the ripening results of previously-created negative karma catch up with oneself.

Many examples are presented in the Lam Rim, specifically where the causal karma can be virtuous, but the completing karma can be negative. The main point is that the results of karma will definitely be experienced. When one creates a positive karma, positive effects will definitely be experienced wherever one takes rebirth. And if one has created negative karmas, those will definitely ripen in whatever rebirth one may take.

The second verse says that *the effects however do not follow merely the wish for happiness or suffering.* I regularly emphasise this point. If one wishes to be happy, one cannot just sit around and think that happiness will somehow come by some day. One actually has to create the causes to be happy. Even when wanting to achieve certain worldly goals, we need to actually exert ourselves to create the conditions to achieve that goal. Likewise if one doesn't wish to experience problems, just sitting around and wishing for them to go away won't work, we actually have to engage in specific causes to remove those conditions.

The commentary further explains, *although the person acting non-virtuously wishes for happiness, by nature, wherever they migrate to, there they will, through that negativity, be destroyed by the weapons of suffering.*

The text went into quite a bit of detail about that previously. There's no-one who wouldn't wish to be happy, and there's no-one who would wish to experience suffering. But while wishing for happiness, many destroy the causes for their happiness. And while not wishing for suffering, they actually unintentionally create the causes for suffering. The problem is ignorance—not knowing how to apply the causes for happiness and how to avoid the causes that lead one to experience the unwanted suffering results. An earlier verse mentions that whilst wishing to not experience any kind of suffering, migrators run to the very cause of suffering. And whilst wishing to experience happiness they destroy their own causes for happiness. The point is that there's no-one who doesn't wish for happiness, but if one destroys the very causes of one's happiness one cannot achieve that state of happiness. Similarly, while one does not wish any kind of suffering, if one actually creates the causes for it, even if one does not wish for it, sufferings will fall on oneself.

#### **2.2.1.2.1.3.2.2. Contemplating singular white karmic cause and effect**

This explains actions that are entirely white or virtuous karma. The verse is preceded by the statement:

Through having meditated on virtuous dharmas the children of the conquerors take rebirth in the Land of Great Bliss and the like.

This means that having familiarised oneself with virtuous dharmas, the children of the conquerors (the bodhisattvas), *actually take rebirth in the Land of Great Bliss and the like.*

The verse reads:

44. *In the centre of an expansive fragrant fresh lotus flower  
Splendour is born from the nourishing melodious teachings of the conqueror  
Possessing a supreme body born from a lotus unfolded by the Able One's luminosity,  
Abiding before the conquerors, they become the Tathagata's children by virtue.*

The commentary explains:

They abide in the centre of a lotus that is the characteristic of birthplace, a beautiful, fresh, vast and expansive fragrant lotus that generates bliss just by touching it.

Instead of living off worldly foods they listen to the more distinguished melodious teachings of the Buddha that possess the sixty qualities of enlightened speech and generate splendour and complexion through the food of the realisation of its subject, emptiness.

To arise from a lotus opened and unfolded by the luminosity of the Able One, the Tathagata, is the characteristic of birth. They possess the characteristic of body, a supreme body with the marks and signs. As the characteristic of teacher, they abide in front of Amitabha Buddha and the like and are carried by their dharmas.

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By way of these characteristics the children of the tathagatas come about solely through white virtuous karma.

The first part of the commentary examines the characteristic of their birthplace which is, *they abide in the centre of a lotus that is the characteristic of birthplace, a beautiful, fresh, vast and expansive fragrant lotus that generates bliss just by touching it.* This is a description of the miraculous birth of a bodhisattva in the pure lands, born from a lotus with very pleasant conditions.

Next it presents the characteristics that nourish bodhisattvas in the pure lands, *instead of living off worldly foods, like the gross kinds of foods that we consume, they listen to the more distinguished melodious teachings of the Buddha that possess the sixty qualities of enlightened speech.* Their time is spent listening to the teachings of the Buddhas and then they *generate splendour and complexion through the food of the realisation of its subject, emptiness.* What nourishes the bodhisattvas' bodies in the pure lands is the splendour they generate, and their complexion is nourished with the food of the realisation of emptiness, which is the subject of those teachings.

The characteristic of the birth itself is, *to arise from a lotus opened and unfolded by the luminosity of the Able One, the luminosity or the light rays of the Able One (Buddha) the Tathagata, is the characteristic of birth.* Initially the lotus bud is closed, then the light rays that come forth from the buddhas serve as a condition for it to open, and it is within that lotus that a bodhisattva takes birth. The characteristic of the body is that, *they possess the characteristic of body, a supreme body with the marks and signs.*

*As the characteristic of teacher, they abide in front of Amitabha Buddha and are carried* (meaning transformed or further developed by) the dharmas of the buddhas such as *Amitabha Buddha* and other buddhas. What is being explained here is that they have actual buddhas such as *Amitabha Buddha* and others, giving direct teachings to them in their actual forms. They have the merit to be able to see the buddhas and receive teachings directly, so their mind develops rapidly.

The commentary concludes that, *by way of these characteristics,* which are the five characteristics just mentioned:

1. the characteristic of the birthplace;
2. the characteristic of the nourishment or food;
3. the characteristic of the actual birth;
4. the characteristic of the physical body; and
5. the characteristic of teacher

*... the children of the tathagatas, (the bodhisattvas), come about solely through white virtuous karma.* So these characteristics with which the bodhisattvas are endowed in the pure lands, *come about solely through white virtuous karma,* meaning they are completely the results of white virtuous karma.

We can reflect upon how wondrous and pleasant that sounds: the very birth is pleasant, no suffering is involved, just being born miraculously from a lotus, with the lotus opened by the light of the buddhas. The body is not a gross body, but a very pure body, which is not nourished by gross food, but rather by the realisations of

the teachings themselves. Then they have the marks and signs on their bodies, and receive teachings directly from the buddhas. This is a wondrous thing we can aspire to, which is why it is appropriate to make aspirations to be born in the blissful pure lands. There are many who take Amitabha as their main practice, and make strong prayers to be born in the pure lands. This is a significant point.

Extracts from *Entrance for the Child of the Conquerors* used with the kind permission of Ven. Fedor Stracke

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